
USING YOUNG-ADULT LITERATURE TO ENHANCE COMPREHENSION IN THE CONTENT AREAS

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INTRODUCTION

We find ourselves in Kenneth Sharp's senior economics class at Sunrise High School on a Wednesday morning. Students are immersed in a simulation aimed at helping them understand the concept of opportunity cost in a shifting, global landscape. (In economics, this vocabulary term refers to trade-offs people make when they decide to invest time or money in some endeavor, to the exclusion of other endeavors). The simulation requires that students take on the role of various characters in Beverly Naidoo's (2000) award-winning novel, *The Other Side of Truth*.

Naidoo's novel chronicles the political strife in Nigeria and centers on a family displaced by a militaristic regime responsible for killing writers opposing its rule. Sade Solaja and her younger brother Femi must flee their home in Lagos, following their journalist father's protests against the military government. Their mother has been murdered by people involved in a plot to assassinate their father, and their father sends them to London under the escort of an unscrupulous guide who abandons them on the streets of London at night.

Sade and Femi must fend for themselves with little money in their pockets and no knowledge of London's mean streets or anyone they can turn to for help. We look in on the Sunrise High economics class as small groups of students role-play the various characters in this early part of the novel. They are using a comprehension strategy called Dinner Party (Vogt, 2000). Mr. Sharp draws on young-adult fiction and comprehension strategies as a way to illuminate complex economic concepts for his students. Their active engagement in this strategy helps make often-slippery concepts in economics come alive.

Dinner Party includes a moderator and various characters and events drawn from history, science, mathematics, English, and other content areas. In the Dinner Party example that follows, each small group includes a moderator and characters from the novel, including the main character, Sade; her younger brother, Femi; and their escort from Nigeria to London, Mrs. Bankole. Dinner Party assumes that you have invited a group to dinner at your home, and the teacher provides discussion prompt questions for the moderator to ask the dinner group. In essence, the group functions as a panel of characters with the participants creating responses spontaneously.

Moderator: Mrs. Bankole, why did you abandon the children after you escorted them to London?

Mrs. B: What can I say? This is how I survive. It costs a lot for my flat in London, and I act as a guide for people fleeing countries where they are persecuted. I am only paid to get them to their destination, not babysit them! It would cost more for that level of care, and most cannot pay me what that would cost.

Moderator: Don't you care about the welfare of young people like Sade and Femi?

Mrs. B: They are poor refugees. The government can take care of them.

Moderator: That's pretty harsh. It seems like all you care about is hustling desperate people for their money. Sade, how did you and Femi manage to survive after being left at night on a London street by Mrs. Bankole?

Sade: We were scared to death. We had a little money with us for a phone call. And we had enough money to catch a bus to the London College of Art where our Uncle Dele, who was supposed to meet us at the airport, taught. But our Uncle Dele was gone, and the people in the office said they hadn't seen him for some time. We were very scared, all alone in a strange city.

At the conclusion of this discussion, each small group reported on their responses along with a whole-group discussion of the economic principle of *opportunity cost*. They contrasted the choices made by Mrs. Bankole, which were highly unethical but maximized her profits, and those made by Sade and Femi in order to survive alone in London on a small amount of change. In essence, the economic principle of opportunity cost boils down to decisions balancing scarcity of resources. Most importantly, the choices people make have both practical and ethical consequences. Reading about opportunity cost in the context of an economics textbook is one thing. Applying the concept to events in a novel where characters often come alive for students (Bean & Rigoni, 2001) is a whole different matter.

Throughout the rest of this paper, I will argue that young-adult literature offers an excellent means of engaging adolescents in reading for pleasure, as well as exploring content area concepts in a fashion that is likely to maximize students' comprehension (Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 2004). In addition, I will provide an overview and examples of how various comprehension strategies can be used to learn key content area concepts introduced in texts and illuminated in young-adult literature. The focus is on the use of young-adult literature because it offers students a high level of engagement that influences comprehension and reading achievement (Bean, 2000; Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999).

I provide a research-based rationale for the use of young-adult literature in content areas along with a useful comprehension taxonomy to guide the application of various discussion strategies. Following the rationale, selected comprehension strategies will be introduced in some detail. These strategies are Anticipation-Reaction Guides, Discussion Guides, ReQuest, Body Biographies, and Dinner Party. Finally, a list of selected young-adult novels and sources of young-adult literature are provided.

WHY USE YOUNG-ADULT LITERATURE IN CONTENT TEACHING?

Contrary to popular myth, young adults enjoy reading fiction (Furi-Perry, 2003). Indeed, according to the American Library Association, around 20 percent of library card patrons are under the age of 18. And fiction is preferred over nonfiction, particularly books that deal with coming-of-age issues (Furi-Perry, 2003). Langer (2003) notes:

Literature is the most underestimated subject of study in schools. It plays a critical role in our lives by helping us reflect on ourselves and the world, but coming to understand it also involves the mind in making sense—it involves a set of cognitive strategies that are useful for the sharp and fully literate mind. (p. 6)

Contemporary young-adult literature aimed at students between the ages of 12 and 20 explores a wide range of societal issues that cut across content areas, including conflict, violence, ethical decisions, ecological issues, and family life. The appeal of fiction, often narrated in first-person voice, rests on teen characters who are usually quite strong, in contrast to common stereotypes that abound about adolescents (Herz & Gallo, 1996).

Young-adult literature occupies a unique space within the world of multiple texts. Young-adult literature is often not well known by content area teachers. Librarians and media specialists are excellent sources of assistance in selecting books to pair with content area concepts. Nevertheless, there is no substitute for browsing teen shelves in bookstores, as well as reviews in journals or online, to find young-adult novels that parallel key content area concepts. I particularly enjoy visiting bookstores when I am traveling and have a few spare moments to look for new novels to use with my classes. This has resulted in some knowledge of Australian and Canadian young-adult literature, along with a fairly broad knowledge of multicultural novels treating issues related to African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, Pacific Islanders, and others.

Most novels run about 125 pages and are highly engaging and readable. A good novel has the potential to illuminate concepts in history, science, mathematics, art, music, physical education, health, agriculture, industrial arts, and a variety of other content areas (Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 2004). For example, in English classes, classics can be paired with young-adult literature, particularly if there are struggling readers who need extra assistance in comprehending challenging prose. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* can be paired with Marie Lee's (1992) young-adult novel *Finding My Voice*. In one scene, Ellen Sung, the Korean-American main character in Lee's novel, attempts to introduce her boyfriend, a European-American high school football player, to her very strict father. Her dad snubs her boyfriend and gives both teens a lecture about dating and being home early. This novel, and others, introduce cross-family issues raised in *Romeo and Juliet*, and these dilemmas can be explored through various strategies. For example, Anticipation-Reaction Guide statements can be created to address issues in both the novel and the play. Open-ended statements such as "love conquers all" raise the level of discussion beyond literal reading responses. Anticipation-Reaction Guides will be discussed in greater detail shortly.

Before moving into a discussion of specific strategies, I must add an important note of caution concerning the use of young-adult literature to illuminate content area concepts. Galda and Liang (2003) noted that readers become engrossed in a work of fiction when they are reading voluntarily and from a primarily aesthetic stance. Rosenblatt (1978) distinguished aesthetic reading from what she termed more informational, efferent reading. In aesthetic reading, the reader's attention is centered on the feelings associated with the lived experience of reading a powerful text, such as a compelling novel, short story, or poem. Efferent reading centers the reading on information to be gained from the text and retained in some fashion. Nevertheless, Rosenblatt is careful to note that there can be overlap between these two forms of reader response. When novels are paired with concepts and textbooks in content areas, there is a danger the novel will be read from a textbook-like stance. According to Galda and Liang (2003), this is less of a problem with middle and secondary school students who generally experience aesthetic engagement in novel reading along with the incidental learning of concepts introduced in fiction. Nevertheless, it is important to be aware of the potential downside of treating a novel as a textbook. Novel reading requires quiet, contemplative time to become immersed in a story world without underlining pages or taking notes.

Using multiple texts including young-adult novels helps expand students' abilities to synthesize concepts across a broad range of print resources, including standard textbooks, the Internet, newspapers, novels, and magazines (Walker & Bean, 2002; Hynd, 1999; Hynd, 2002). In a five-year multiple case study involving 25 schools, Langer (2001) found that English instruction in high-performing schools included discussions that helped students make connections across various texts (e.g., nonfiction textbooks), fiction, and media. For example, in one middle school class, students read the holocaust-based novel *Night* by Elie Wiesel (1960). They wrote poems and visited the Museum of Tolerance to gain information for additional writing. Following their visit, they created letters from three points of view in order to critique the novel in terms of its historical, ethical, and political issues. Clearly, this in-depth engagement in reading and responding to fiction has the potential to influence students' content learning and subsequent performance in reading comprehension. The issue of student voice in novel discussion is crucial.

In a multiple case study of experienced English teachers' beliefs and practices, Agee (2000) found that some teachers placed themselves at the center of discussion, diminishing students' interpretive options. Agee notes, "Narrow conceptions of literature and reading, especially those that are marked by monologic rather than dialogic practices, establish literature as a cultural icon with little room for students to develop critical interpretive skills" (p. 307). In contrast, other teachers were clearly interested in assisting students' efforts to make personal and intertextual connections across various texts and media. Intertextual connections entail constructing meaning from multiple texts, including fiction, nonfiction, film, and other discourse (Rogers & Tierney, 2002). In the text-rich world of the Internet, this process is already familiar to adolescents, but the connection to school-based reading and discussion may be less visible. Making these connections more explicit will go a long way toward developing an already important skill in reading and responding to ideas in young-adult literature and various content areas.

In summary, using young-adult literature offers the following benefits in content area teaching:

- Adolescents enjoy reading engaging, popular young-adult fiction.
- Young-adult literature often features strong adolescent characters.
- Young-adult literature can be paired with the classics to serve as a bridge for struggling readers.
- Using multiple texts including young adult literature helps students learn to synthesize concepts across a range of texts.

In addition to the specific strategies for engaging students in novel and text concept discussion—which will follow—two of the simplest yet most powerful approaches to using young-adult literature in your content area involve reading aloud to students and sustained, silent reading (Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 2004). I recommend selecting novels that have engaging, lyrical language to read aloud.

READING ALOUD TO STUDENTS AND SUSTAINED, SILENT READING

Nearly all recent young-adult novels can be read aloud. For example, Jacqueline Woodson's (2002) novel *Hush* chronicles the plight of a family in a protected witness program. The novel links nicely with social studies issues relating to citizenship, ethical decisions, and their sometimes negative impact on families. As a prelude to reading aloud to students, identify good prediction points in the novel where students can speculate on the events described and future scenes they will encounter. I find that reading aloud for about 10 minutes at the end of a period can enrich content learning in many subject fields. Moreover, it has a soothing effect on students that most teachers find an added benefit. I recommend starting small by reading and identifying a few good young-adult novels that support concept learning in science, math, history, and other content areas.

Sustained, silent reading (SSR) is now part and parcel of many students' experiences with growing evidence that it impacts fluency and students' attitudes toward reading (Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 2004). For example, Gardiner (2001) conducted research in English classes over a 20-year period in order to gauge the impact of SSR on high school students' achievement. He found that students who were engaged in frequent SSR earned higher grades and were more likely to read for pleasure outside the classroom. Similarly, international assessments of literacy development show that higher-achieving students are more likely to hold positive attitudes toward reading (Shiel & Cosgrove, 2002). In addition, these students borrow more library books and engage in leisure reading outside of school. A variety of young-adult novels that support content learning should be made available as part of a classroom library. Using SSR in this fashion to support concept learning in biology, mathematics, history, and other fields is a departure from the self-selected SSR many teachers have tried with varying levels of success. Frankly, contrary to all the conventional wisdom about students reading a variety of self-selected books, I still prefer to have students engaged in reading a common young-adult novel. By reading a common novel in social studies such as Gary Soto's (1997) *Buried Onions*, we can have rich, in-depth discussions about issues brought forth in the novel concerning race, class, and gender (Bean & Rigoni, 2001). Eddie, the main character in *Buried Onions*, is a community college dropout barely getting by in a Fresno barrio and receiving constant pressure from his aunt to avenge a relative's gang-related murder. The novel raises a number of issues surrounding racism, cultural capital, economic opportunity, stereotyping, and the status-conscious dimensions of our society.

When students read (or feign reading) self-selected novels during SSR, the opportunity to carry on common discourse and discussion is limited. One solution to disengaged reading is to involve students in the discussion and production of creative products (e.g., Body Biographies, role playing, song writing) that are interactive rather than passive. Indeed, effective literacy instruction in middle and high schools has been characterized as a form of dialogic inquiry in which both teachers and students pose and explore authentic questions (Angelis, 2003). This dialogic inquiry is supported by strategies that help students comprehend challenging ideas and have ample time for extended conversations about key issue or ideas (Angelis, 2003). In a study of tracking conducted by the Center on English Learning and Achievement (Angelis, 2003), lower-track classes had significantly less time devoted to dialogic inquiry. In the sections that follow, I offer a straightforward taxonomy to guide question development along with an array of discussion strategies aimed at engaging students in productive content area discussions supported by young-adult literature.

USING A SIMPLE TAXONOMY TO GUIDE NOVEL DISCUSSION

Rather than a lengthy and elaborate taxonomic or category system for identifying levels of questions, I prefer the classroom-based system developed and tested by Dr. Taffy Raphael (see Baldwin, Readence, & Bean, 2004; Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 2004). Three levels of comprehension are delineated that link directly with the source of information for answering a question. In this paper, I will use this system to denote the levels of comprehension sought in each discussion and response strategy. The three levels are:

- *Right on the page.* This refers to text-explicit comprehension, in which the answer to a question can be found in the novel's discourse, for example, "What was Sade's brother's name in *The Other Side of Truth*?" (His name is Femi.)
- *Think and search.* This refers to text-implicit comprehension, in which the reader must infer the answer to a question based on hints in the novel, for example, "Why did Sade decide to approach an evening newscaster about her father's plight in jail?" (She felt this might alert people to his false imprisonment and garner him some help in gaining freedom.)
- *On your own.* This refers to experience-based comprehension, in which there is no right answer, and many possible solutions to a problem or character's dilemma might be posed, for example, "What do you think will happen to Sade and her family when her father gets out of jail?" (They may decide to go home to Nigeria, stay in England, move elsewhere to a place where he can continue practicing journalism without persecution, or a host of other possibilities.)

What is important about this simple, three-level question taxonomy is the awareness students develop in discerning where answers to questions can be found. Most importantly, we want to move students toward higher-level thinking, and the process of structuring discussion questions and guide material using this taxonomy can help accomplish this goal. In essence, "comprehension and mastery of content material frequently demands in-depth study beyond the factual, literal level" (Baldwin, Readence, & Bean, 2004, p. 30). For example, as consumers, we expect that a graduate of a high-quality college of pharmacy understands medicine at a deep conceptual level, rather than simply memorizing formulas and related names of medications. The strategies that follow are designed to focus students' attention on rich, conceptual understanding.

Prior to responding to any novel discussion-guide material, it is often a good idea to have students keep a response journal where they can jot down their own character impressions along with questions they want to pose for further discussion (Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 2004). This is especially important in guiding students to make cognitive connections across narrative and expository texts in content areas.

COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES

Anticipation-Reaction Guides

Anticipation-Reaction Guides consist of a series of statements at the three levels of comprehension—right on the page, think and search, and on your own. Create statements for a chapter or longer section of a young-adult novel using the following steps:

- 1. Identify the concepts to be emphasized.
- 2. Consider students’ experiences and beliefs that may be challenged by the reading selection.
- 3. Create three or four statements for prereading and postreading discussion.
- 4. Place the statements in a PowerPoint® slide, handout, or transparency.
- 5. Engage students in a prereading discussion. Following a reading of the novel selection or a combination of the novel and related textbook concepts, debrief by reconsidering each anticipatory response in light of new information.

The following example from Marie Lee’s (1996) young-adult novel *Necessary Roughness* illustrates an Anticipation-Reaction Guide aimed at a consideration of the appropriate use of a martial art skill in a physical education class. The novel revolves around a Korean-American character, Chan Kim, displaced from his Los Angeles neighborhood to a small town in Minnesota where he becomes his new high school football team’s kicker. He is one of the only minority students in the town and constantly harassed as a result. In this scene, Chan and his football buddies have been viewing a martial arts video. Chan is an expert in tae kwan do, a Korean martial art. Figure 1 displays the guide.

Figure 1. Anticipation-Reaction Guide

Necessary Roughness (pp. 135–138)

Directions: Consider the following statements and decide whether you agree or disagree with them. Use a (+) if you agree or a (–) if you disagree. Be prepared to discuss your responses and reasoning with your small group and the whole class. Following the reading of this selection, reconsider the statements in light of Chan’s actions.

Agree	Disagree	
_____	_____	1. Hollywood accurately portrays cultural diversity.
_____	_____	2. Martial arts training involves using this skill responsibly.
_____	_____	3. If you were an expert in tae kwan do and someone challenged you to a fight, you would decline.

In the novel, Chan and his football classmates watch a film featuring a well-known martial arts star. Rom, one of Chan’s teammates, derides the Korean actor in the film, using racial epithets and saying, “Kill him!” Chan finally loses his patience and has his buddies get some scrap lumber and supports. He uses his martial arts knowledge and skill to snap the thick boards. Afterward, Chan’s thoughts are presented:

Everyone wanted me to show how I did it, but I went home soon after that. I somehow felt dirty, like I'd flashed everyone on a dare or something. I didn't feel the way I thought I would. Mikko didn't say much to me either. He seemed kind of disappointed in me. (Lee, 1996, p. 138)

Ethical and philosophical dilemmas like this one are common in young-adult novels and offer a tremendous springboard to discuss larger cultural issues. As a prelude to engaging students in a discussion of larger cultural issues in a novel like this one, it is important to spend some time offering a cultural history. For example, with Marie Lee's novel, I walked students in my graduate content area reading class through an overview of the three waves of Korean immigration to America, along with various contributions by Koreans to U.S. language and culture. Although the example of the Anticipation-Reaction Guide with this novel centers on athletic prowess issues, much of the novel deals with racial conflicts, making it a good companion text in world history. Statements developed for Anticipation-Reaction Guides offer one means of scaffolding rich discussions, but the age-old process of carefully considering a good question is still a mainstay of dialogic inquiry. In the section that follows, I illustrate this process with guides I have used recently to consider key elements of Jacqueline Woodson's (2002) young-adult novel *Hush*, which was summarized earlier.

Discussion Guides

Discussion Guides used to link young-adult literature with key content area concepts come in many forms (Baldwin, Readence, & Bean, 2004). Provocative discussion questions created by teachers and students are at the heart of this approach and represent an efficient way to engage students in issues that cut across fiction and nonfiction materials. Create questions for a chapter or longer section of a young-adult novel using the following steps:

1. Identify the concepts to be emphasized.
2. Decide on both the level and basis for reader responses to the novel chapter or selection. Consider students' experiences and beliefs that may be challenged by the reading selection. Thus, students may be asked to deal with issues in the novel from a reader-response stance (Rosenblatt, 1978), in which they place themselves in the character's shoes.
3. Create three or four questions for postreading discussion.
4. Place the questions in a PowerPoint® slide, handout, or transparency.
5. Engage students in a post-reading discussion. Following a reading of the novel selection or a combination of the novel and related textbook concepts, use this as a basis for helping students to generate their own questions for discussion.

The example that follows parallels reading in a high school psychology class where teen identity issues are being considered. Figure 2 displays the guide.

Figure 2. Discussion Guide

Hush (chapters 1–7)

1. You have witnessed a murder and finally decide to testify against the killers and enter a federal witness protection program. You are scheduled to leave your home tomorrow morning very early with the instructions that you can only take a small duffle bag of personal items. What would you take with you?
2. Toswiah, our narrator and main character in the novel, flees Denver and moves to San Francisco with her family. She also gets a new name, Evie. She is on the run, and her feelings about this are raw edged. She says:

Everything about who we are is gone—our names, our pictures, our old clothes and old lives. All that we have is our souls. If a soul is the way you feel deep inside yourself about a thing, the way you love it, the way it stops your breath, then mine is still in Colorado. (Woodson, 2002, p. 13)

How do you see Evie (formerly Toswiah) coping with this wrenching away from her past identity in Denver where she had been a balanced, happy African-American adolescent?

3. Once Evie's (Toswiah's) father decides to testify against the white police officers for killing a black teen, race becomes a marker for attacks on Evie's family. Evie's former high school friends treat her as an outcast, and racist attacks against her are frequent. Is this something that you have experienced? If so, how did you cope with it, and how do you see Evie handling the anger of her former friends?

It is important to note that in this Discussion Guide, each of the three questions encompassed right-on-the-page, higher-level comprehension. In addition, rather than embracing a precanned interpretation of events and ethical dilemmas in the novel, a reader-response stance is apparent. Students are asked for their views on how to cope with the serious problems addressed in the novel. While there are lighthearted young-adult novels, the most powerful in this genre deal with the day-to-day struggles of teens in a fast-moving, fluid global world where social justice often takes a back seat to conflict (Bean & Moni, 2003). Themes of displacement and loss are common in many of these novels, reflecting the global unrest and risk that impacts everyone. Business authors Micklethwait and Wooldridge (2000) argue, "Throughout much of the developed world, the middle class is splintering between those who benefit from globalization and those who are being left out" (p. 249).

While Discussion Guides assume a certain level of independence in reading texts and literature, the next strategy, Reciprocal Questioning (Manzo, 1969) can be especially helpful for struggling adolescent readers (Baldwin, Readence, & Bean, 2004).

ReQuest

ReQuest (Manzo, 1969) stands for Reciprocal Questioning. It is a strategy aimed at helping students question and think about text concepts at think-and-search and on-your-own levels (Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 2004). The goal is to move students beyond low-level literal questions to higher-order thinking. The teacher models the question-asking process first, followed by student-based questions. Because ReQuest slices a young-adult novel chapter into smaller units, it is ideal for struggling readers who may be intimidated by a longer selection. Thus, ReQuest can be used for chapter books with a focus on a single section of a chapter. The following steps are needed to develop and carry out an effective ReQuest strategy lesson:

1. Identify key sections of a young-adult novel where you can have students pause to answer and create questions. You can indicate key sections with a self-adhesive note attached to the page and paragraph where you are going to guide a ReQuest discussion. This should be a section of a chapter that lends itself to predictions about oncoming events involving the main character in the story, as well as an opportunity for personal reader responses (e.g., "What would you do in this situation?").
2. Explain the ReQuest process to students, indicating that you and they will read a selected portion of the chapter together silently. Then, the teacher will close the book, and students can ask all the questions they can think of, referring to the chapter section as needed. It is generally helpful to develop a question guide that provides some example think-and-search and on-your-own questions. Once students are familiar with ReQuest, they can branch out from these questions. Having students first ask questions on a section of the chapter offers an opportunity to gauge the level of their thinking and then to model, in the teacher's questions, higher-order items.
3. Develop intertextual connections between the concepts dealt with in the novel and your content area concepts.

In the Australian young-adult novel *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* (Zusak, 2000), two working class boys take up boxing in an illegal weekend gambling operation. Their initial reason for doing this is driven by their father's recent unemployment and a desire to help their family during a tough time. But Ruben becomes a boxing star in the rough warehouse setting of the weekend fights, and Cameron, the younger brother, becomes the underdog. In addition to common young-adult themes of displacement and economic struggle, the novel wrestles with teen identity construction and larger philosophical questions of what constitutes a moral and ethical life. Thus, within the context of a psychology class or a social science class dealing with globalization and its mixed consequences, this novel would lend itself to ReQuest. In the example that follows, students in a high school psychology class are considering a section in the middle of *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* where Cameron, the narrator, comments on the profound transformation that has taken place in the two brothers' lives. In the not-too-distant past, boxing was a game they sparred at in their backyard for fun. Now that they are in the illegal boxing business, it has driven a wedge into their former, easygoing relationship. The section of Chapter 8 in the novel just before the last two pages goes to the heart of this rift and lends itself to ReQuest linked to psychological displacement and loss, common themes in contemporary young-adult novels. Figure 3 displays this strategy lesson.

Figure 3. ReQuest

Fighting Ruben Wolfe (pp. 112–113)

The worst part is the knowing that things have changed. See, Rube and I had always been together. We were both down low. We were both scrap. Both no good. Now Rube's a winner, and I'm a Wolfe on my own. I'm the Underdog, alone. (p. 113)

Teacher: We'll read the last part of Chapter 8 silently, and then I'll close my book and you can ask me any questions you have, using the guide I gave you. You can keep your books open.

Student 1: Why did Cameron feel like things have changed so much? (think-and-search question)

Teacher: That's really a good question, and it goes to the heart of how Ruben and Cameron's feelings about themselves as very close brothers seem to be changing into a more competitive relationship influenced by the illegal boxing arena. The one constant for the two boys seems to be the closeness of their family, even in times of strife. Are there other ideas about this change in Cameron and Ruben's feelings toward one another?

(*Other students* offer responses and personal examples from their families.)

Student 2: We've been reading about identity issues, and it seems like Ruben and Cameron think of themselves as boxers. The problem I see, from my own experiences as a basketball player, is that you can't always be a winner. There will always be someone out there who is better than you. So, I don't think Ruben and Cameron can base who they are just on boxing. The family is really who they are in a stable way even though their dad is out of work and their mom is picking up part-time jobs.

Teacher: Yes, that's a really good notion—the family does seem to be a kind of refuge for Ruben and Cameron, especially in those parts of the novel when they are in their room talking to one another and the font changes from manuscript to cursive writing. It seems to me that this signals the really sensitive parts of the novel where it's okay to discuss their feelings, something society encourages males to avoid at all costs.

Student 3: This question is for everyone. If you were in their shoes, would you give up the illegal weekend boxing? Why or why not? (This on-your-own question generates an array of yes and no responses tied to the bottom-line need for money in the family as a rationalization for boxing, as well as a recognition that the boys are trading their souls for this line of work.)

ReQuest sets the stage for the next slice of reading the novel. In working with struggling adolescent readers, ReQuest can be structured in smaller reading increments, or you can read text aloud to students, followed by their silent reading and question generation. This is especially important for second-language learners who need to hear the pronunciation of words and approach young-adult-novel and text reading in manageable slices.

While ReQuest offers guidance during and after reading a novel selection, Body Biographies offer a highly creative means to explore novel characterization and content area concepts.

Body Biographies

Body Biographies involve the creation of a multimedia interpretation of a character in a novel or a major figure in any content area (Smagorinsky & O'Donnell-Allen, 1998). Because students must carefully think through their choices of what key quotes, events, and visual devices to include in their creation, Body Biographies are tremendously useful in focusing students' attention on events in history, key figures in science and math, as well as many other content areas (e.g., through reading novels and biographies). Body Biographies are postreading wall displays in the shape of a human body.

For example, in Gary Soto's (1997) young-adult novel *Buried Onions*, Eddie, the main character, drops out of his freshman year at a Fresno community college, drifting from one menial job to another before joining the navy. Eddie rents his own small apartment in a barrio in Fresno. Although this novel has been used to explore citizenship issues in a ninth-grade social studies class (Bean & Rigoni, 2001), it could easily be used to do mathematics problem solving related to middle school students' formulating a budget based on a simulation where they are in Eddie's shoes, making the minimum wage (Alvermann, Boyd, Brozo, Hinchman, Moore, & Sturtevant, 2002). Calculations of monthly gross salary, monthly tax amounts, and formulating a monthly budget could be considered.

Figure 4 displays a high school class Body Biography on Eddie, the main character in *Buried Onions*.

The following steps should be undertaken to engage students in developing aesthetically powerful Body Biographies on a novel character and any linkages to content area concepts being studied:

1. Have students in small groups cut a 7-foot-long sheet from a roll of paper. Place the sheet on the floor and have one student lie down on it. Another student draws an outline of the first student's body on the paper.
2. Students in each small group then fill in the body outline with artistic representations of the character's traits, relationships, motivations, and experiences. These may include relevant quotations and original text about the character.

Figure 4. Body Biography



Body Biographies require students to think carefully and reflectively about both content and aesthetic details. The following concerns might underpin a rubric for evaluating students' Body Biographies:

- Placement of the artwork is important. (For example, the heart in Figure 4 is actually an onion and relates to the novel title and images of pain and tears.)
- Students should be advised to help their audience visualize the character's virtues and vices.
- Using color helps symbolize traits of the main character.
- Using symbols also helps capture the character's essence.
- Using poetry can be effective for portraying hidden dimensions of the character.
- Consider contrasting the character's self-view with the views of others.
- As most characters change across the events of a novel, consider using artwork to show this transformation.

Most young-adult novels have enough breadth to illuminate various concepts across multiple content areas. Thus, teachers do not need to search specifically for "a math novel." In addition to the common themes of displacement and loss, many young-adult novels center on teens' transition from being dependent to being independent. As such, they are tremendous sites for exploring a host of issues, including ecology and ethics in science, budgeting concepts in mathematics, alternative views of history, or paired readings with the classics. Because young-adult novels can be read relatively quickly—most are about 125 pages long with high-interest readability—they can be used as a prelude to classical literature.

The final strategy to be considered is Dinner Party (Vogt, 2002), which was briefly introduced at the beginning of this paper.

Dinner Party

Dinner Party assumes you could invite characters from a young-adult novel (or other forms of text) to your home for dinner and conversation. The purpose of Dinner Party is for students to act in the roles of specific characters in response to prompt questions and various roles. The following steps reflect how I use Dinner Party to discuss crucial events in a novel and provide a role-playing atmosphere:

1. Decide which characters from the novel will be part of a panel discussion. Generally, about five or six characters, including some whose voices were silenced in the novel, is about right. Create large nametags for each character so both the students role-playing and those in the audience can identify who is speaking.
2. Assign one of the group members the role of moderator.
3. Provide an initial prompt question to get the discussion rolling.
4. Use an excerpt from the novel or a particularly conflict-ridden scene to engage students in the discussion.
5. Debrief at the end of the role playing to illuminate any key issues that were revealed in the discussion and any content area concepts that were clarified.

In the example that follows, an excerpt from David Klass's (1996) young-adult novel *Danger Zone* shows how Dinner Party can be used to deal with issues of racism. Figure 5 illustrates the use of this strategy in a social studies classroom.

Figure 5. Dinner Party

Danger Zone (p. 66)

Plot Summary: In the novel, Jimmy Doyle, who is from a small town in Minnesota, has been chosen to play basketball on an American “Dream Team” slated to compete in Italy. In this scene, he has just finished his first scrimmage with the team. Jimmy was selected to replace Devonnie Saunders, a star player’s cousin on the team. In this example, Augustus LeMay, the star African-American player from south-central Los Angeles clashes with Jimmy.

“You don’t belong here,” he [Augustus] said. “He’s the guy who should be the other starting guard ... but they dropped him.”

“I am white and I’m from Minnesota. So what? I still don’t get it.” [Jimmy]

“It’s just that I don’t have much patience with ... some rich, blond-haired stiff who wouldn’t last five minutes on any playground in this city.” [Augustus]

I [Jimmy] lost all control and swung at him. (Klass, 1996, p. 66)

They fight, and the coach has to break it up. In the Dinner Party discussion, students role-play Jimmy, Augustus, the coach, and less prominent characters, including Jimmy’s mother, his girlfriend, and silenced characters, including Devonnie, Augustus’s dad (deceased), and others. The prompt question for the moderator who starts the discussion is this: “As coach, what would you say in the locker room to Augustus and Jimmy following their fight, and what would you do to quell racist attacks within your team?”

In my experience, the level of engagement in Dinner Party is very high, sometimes lapsing into Jerry-Springer-like dramatics. It is important to debrief and summarize the concepts learned from the novel and their relation to the content of a specific content area. You may want to have videotapes of the actual role playing to guide debriefing.

SELECTING YOUNG-ADULT LITERATURE

Criteria for the selection of young-adult literature typically center on the following points (Bushman & Haas, 2001):

- Is the plot realistic and of interest to adolescents?
- Are the characters dynamic and likely to appeal to adolescents?
- Is the setting interesting but not overpowering?
- Is the theme of the novel compelling and related to the human condition?

You may wish to add to this list specific items that reflect your particular content area, including science, mathematics, social studies, and so on.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although we have a number of studies describing literature teaching in English classrooms, there are too few studies exploring the impact of young-adult literature on students' content learning. We need more classroom-based action research investigating students' concept learning and subsequent achievement in relation to their reading of young-adult novels along with traditional texts and multimedia. For example, Connor (2003) reported a study in her English classroom where, in a unit on minority authors and slavery, students read and responded to the compelling black-and-white narrative paintings in *The Middle Passage: White Ships/Black Cargo* (Feelings, 1995). Connors used reader response to explore students' responses to the book, including evaluations of individual responses consisting of art, poetry writing, and a letter to the author. Her action research found that students were highly engaged with this text, resulting in a more complete grasp of history and context in which early African-American literature developed. Thus, in her class, the inclusion of young-adult literature was a value-added dimension that contributed to students' content area learning. We need similar studies spanning other content domains, including mathematics, science, and social studies.

SUMMARY

In this paper, I have offered a rationale for using young-adult literature to illuminate and reinforce content area concepts. In addition, a useful taxonomy for creating discussion questions was introduced. Five teaching strategies were illustrated spanning prereading, during-reading, and postreading stages: Anticipation-Reaction Guides (prereading), Discussion Guides (during-reading), ReQuest (during-reading), Body Biographies (postreading), and Dinner Party (postreading).

Additional strategies and lists of young-adult novels by content area are available in the content area reading textbook I use in my classes (Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 2004).

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- The American Library Association Web site lists the top 10 best books for young adults at **www.ala.org/yalsa/booklists/bbya/2003top10best.html**.
- The Young Adult Library Services Association of the American Library Association offers a Web site centered on teens at **www.cyberteens.com**.

While a vast array of young-adult novels is now available, I suggest reading and working with a single novel in your content area each year. Over time, you can expand your collection of relevant titles. Look for highly lyrical, captivating language; interesting multidimensional characters; and an absence of simplistic stereotypes. Each of the strategies introduced should help guide vibrant discussions in your content areas.

SUGGESTED TITLES

The whole area of young-adult literature continues to blossom with new novels coming out all the time. I suggest starting small by getting to know some key sources you can use in your particular content area. The titles that follow, for example, are books I am currently reading. They deal with contemporary issues in social studies and other content fields.

Brooks, M. (2002). *True confessions of a heartless girl*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Groundwood Books.
Life transitions in adolescence are explored in this novel—a book that could be used in psychology.

Ellis, D. (2000). *The breadwinner*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Groundwood Books.
This novel looks at life in Afghanistan from the perspective of a young girl and Taliban rule. The book could be used in world history. Part of a trilogy, this opening novel is followed by *Parvana's Journey* (2002) and *Mud City* (2003), both from Groundwood Books.

Flake, S. (2001). *Money hungry*. New York: Hyperion.
A homeless, 13-year-old girl's life on the street forms the core of this award-winning, young-adult novel—a book that could be used to explore contemporary problems in social studies and other content areas including mathematics and economics.

Klass, D. (1994). *California blue*. New York: Scholastic.
This novel deals with the discovery of an endangered butterfly in the logging country of northern California. The main character endures the wrath of the logging community when its livelihood is threatened by his discovery. This book can be used in science to explore environmental and ecological issues. It could also be used in social studies where citizenship issues are examined.

Ryan, P. (2000). *Esperanza rising*. New York: Scholastic.
This novel chronicles a young girl's life in a Mexican farm labor camp during the Great Depression. The book lends itself to American history and other courses.

Sachar, L. (1998). *Holes*. New York: Dell Laurel-Leaf.
Set in a dry lake bed, this suspenseful novel could accompany science or mathematics units, as well as social studies. The recent release of a film version of the story makes the novel a good choice for struggling adolescent readers as well.

Spinelli, J. (2000). *Stargirl*. New York: Knopf.
This novel goes to the heart of cliques in adolescent life and their impact on Stargirl. The book could be used in psychology.

